

Kindergarten Readiness: Are We on Target?

Issues Impacting Students Entering Kindergarten.

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Abstract

Kindergarten readiness is becoming a crucial piece of the puzzle in helping our students reach their benchmarks and experience success in school. As a kindergarten teacher, I am interested in finding out what the contributing factors are in helping prepare our children for kindergarten. I will begin by defining kindergarten or school readiness and look at why it is significant. I will also be looking at how age, pre-school experience, ethnic group differences, and the roles of parents, schools, and communities impact children going into kindergarten. I will look at the need for assessment and early intervention in order to better prepare our students for a successful transition into kindergarten. Finally, I will make some recommendations on how to make sure that we are on target for our students entering kindergarten. What will it take to better prepare our students for their early experiences in learning?

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What is kindergarten readiness? Lilles et al. (2009) explains kindergarten or school readiness in the following way:

School readiness is no longer thought of as merely a chronological benchmark, but rather a composite of cognitive, social-emotional, behavioral, and physical elements that are associated with successful transition to elementary school paired with how the school receives the children. (p.71)

Kindergarten readiness is often divided between readiness for school and readiness to learn. Readiness for school refers to the belief that a child must have a certain level of mastery of pre-academic skills before entering kindergarten. In contrast, readiness to learn focuses on children's developmental maturation or biological growth (Kim, Murdock, & Choi, 2005). A common and shared definition of readiness, became law in 2002 for Hawaii, and states the following: "Young children are ready to have successful learning experiences in school when there is a positive interaction of the child's developmental characteristics, school practices, and family and community support" (Grace & Brandt, 2005, p. 17).

There is a renewed emphasis on education in the early primary grades because it serves as the foundation for future learning. For this important reason, kindergarten readiness has taken a front seat for parents, school, communities, and teachers. Literature on early education and school readiness illustrates that a successful transition from preschool to kindergarten predicts

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later academic success (Lilles et al., 2009). Further, school readiness is important because we want all children to start school ready to learn. The transition into kindergarten lays the foundation for future academic success. Cognitive readiness is significantly related to later academic performance. Social-emotional development plays a significant role in shaping children's early school experiences (Lilles et al., 2009). In addition, when looking at school readiness, K-1 teachers traditionally spend a great deal of time preparing students to learn, as great variability exists between students in their school readiness (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007).

Another important reason for focusing on kindergarten readiness is knowing that children from ages 0-5 are developing life-long skills. Bates et al. (2006) explains the importance of early interventions and skill building:

Recent advances in science have underscored how critical children's first five years of life are to their later success in school and life. It has also been recently recognized that early childhood interventions, particularly those that combine child-focused educational activities with parent-child relationship building, can positively influence children's readiness for school, particularly for those at-risk for poor developmental outcomes. (p.41)

Finally, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) states that: "From birth to age of five is the period of the most rapid growth in children's linguistic, cognitive, emotional, social, regulatory, and moral abilities, and it is during this time that the foundation for future development is laid."

In looking at kindergarten readiness it is important to address the following questions: What factors determine kindergarten readiness? Why is it that some children are ready to start and

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others are not? How can we ensure that our nation's children are on target for learning in public schools? There are many factors that contribute to a child's early development and academic beginnings. The first factor to look at is whether or not age plays a significant role in kindergarten readiness. When looking at age school readiness, children are viewed as ready for kindergarten entry when they have achieved a certain level of physical and psychological maturity (Furlong & Quirk, 2011). It is often assumed that older is better, this is not always the case. In looking at a study on chronological age on Hispanic students' school readiness and grade 2 achievement, Furlong & Quirk (2011) found that overall, age and gender (significantly, but slightly) and preschool experience (significantly and moderately) were related to Hispanic children's school readiness upon entry into kindergarten. "School readiness (vs. learner readiness), at kindergarten entry was the most significant factor in predicting children's later academic success. (p. 88)

Another, and extremely important factor in kindergarten readiness, is a child's school readiness. A constructivist model, which is based on readiness emerging from children's interactions with skilled peers and adults, will be the focus of looking at how preschool positively impacts young children entering kindergarten. In their study, Furlong & Quirk (2011) found that, pre-school experience rated significantly higher in terms of school readiness than children with no preschool experience, older children, on average, are more ready at kindergarten entry than younger peers and girls slightly more ready than boys. Youngest children with Head Start preschool experience were more ready than oldest children with no known preschool experience. The effects of preschool experience, on average, help children to improve their basic cognitive and social-emotional skill sets that they need to enter school ready to learn and respond to high-quality instruction (Furlong & Quirk, 2011). Lilles et al. (2009) states that "in addition,

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preschool experience predicts children's academic performance during the transition to kindergarten. Children with positive pre-kindergarten experiences also tend to develop positive attitudes toward school and the school environment.” (p.72) Research has also shown that high-quality pre-schools play an important role in developing essential cognitive and social skills (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009).

When looking at how powerful preschool experiences are for our students, it is important to stress the need for high-quality preschool programs. What early childhood caregivers believe that children should experience before entering kindergarten has implications for school readiness. The quality of the preschool environment, including teacher education and training, is crucial for high-quality preschool programs. Results from Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2009) qualitative study revealed three types of preschool classroom experiences that participants believed to be important when preparing children for kindergarten: meaningful teacher-child interactions, appropriate and rich learning environment, and learning opportunities or encounters that support young learners.

High-quality preschool programs provide what our students need for coming into kindergarten. The importance of a child's early years for cognitive, emotional, and physical development is well established in the literature. Therefore, the next step is to provide universal, high-quality pre-kindergarten for all of our children. Universal pre-kindergarten is preschool education that is available and free to all children. “By providing quality pre-kindergarten programs to all children, schools can ensure greater levels of kindergarten readiness which, in turn, lead to higher-achieving students” (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007, p. 55). High-quality, universal pre-kindergarten programs have been shown to provide children with developmentally appropriate instruction that builds foundations for pre-reading, pre-numeracy, and pre-writing

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skills necessary for success in school (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007). These programs will benefit all students.

An example of a high-quality preschool program and structure exists for students ages 3 and 4 in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. This school district has created a full-day preschool program. Teachers plan a mix of teacher-directed time, self-directed time, and play time. Each preschool class has no more than 15 students and has a teacher with a bachelor's degree and certification, as well as a trained paraprofessional. In addition, they chose state-adopted preschool curriculum and provided their teachers with professional development. "As a result, the district has worked to develop a preschool program that prepares children for school both socially and academically – and that gets them excited about learning" (Dubin, 2010, p. 31). Kindergarten teachers in this district report that they can spend more time teaching content instead of emphasizing appropriate classroom behavior.

Another factor that impacts kindergarten readiness is ethnicity. Wang (2008), in a study on examining the degree to which achievement gaps existed among different ethnic and racial groups before kindergarten entry, found that there is a pre-kindergarten achievement gap. "The largest minority and majority difference in mathematics knowledge and skills and literacy knowledge skills is found between Hispanic children and White children" (Wang, 2008, p. 30). These differences can be explained by socioeconomic status, by family structure and practices, and by school program and quality (Wang, 2008).

In another look at how ethnicity and race are impacting our children in America today, Takanishi (2004), looks at how we can better support immigrant children from ages birth to eight and how these children are currently starting school behind. Takanishi (2004) reports that:

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One in five children under age 18 in the United States today is the child of an immigrant, and immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the nation's population of children. Children of immigrants also are disproportionately represented among the poor, and their poverty rates have increased dramatically over the past quarter century. (p.62)

In addition, newcomer children and families, particularly those whose first language is not English, face considerable barriers to accessing programs and services. Many young children do not have good access to health and education services (Takanishi, 2004). A broad range of universal policies could help address immigrant children's needs: provide early education for all children, all young children from ages three to four should have access to sound voluntary pre-kindergarten programs taught by well-qualified, certified teachers, require full-day kindergarten, and offer dual-language programs for all children (Takanishi, 2004). In conclusion, Takanishi (2004) argues that:

The overarching goal of American public policy aimed at children and families should be to level the playing field for all children, including the increasing numbers of children in families who are newcomers to the United States. All children deserve equal access to needed services to promote their healthy development. (p. 62)

Finally, we will look at how families, schools, and communities play a role in school readiness. Kim, Murdock, and Choi (2005) investigated parents' beliefs about readiness. The emphasis of kindergarten use to be socialization skills and play with other children, while these skills are still fostered, today's kindergarten has become academically oriented. This rise in

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academic standards has caused some parents to hold their children back a year from kindergarten if they perceive them to have “poor readiness.” Many parents believe that their children need more time in preschool to develop needed skills (Kim et al., 2005). Overall, parents’ strong beliefs in social interactions seem to be inconsistent with the current trend emphasizing academic skills at the kindergarten level. Parents understanding of kindergarten readiness was based on learner readiness instead of school readiness. “Parents seem to believe that children should be ready for social interaction before acquiring basic academic skills” (Kim et al., 2005, p. 12).

In addition to the many factors that define readiness, there is a growing recognition that it is not enough for children to simply be ready for school. Schools and communities must also be ready for children if they are going to be successful learners (Grace & Brandt, 2005). Readiness is framed by Grace and Brandt (2005) as an interaction among children, families, schools, and communities. (p.14)

As we have seen, there are many factors that impact learner and school readiness, including age, pre-school and early learning experiences, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and parents, community, and school’s roles. In order to address kindergarten readiness and all the factors that go into what a kindergarten child comes into school knowing, it is important to look at the need for early assessments and interventions. Lilles et al. (2009) states that “increased recognition of the importance of early intervention has led to advances in the assessment of young children’s school readiness.” (p.72) Also, with increased awareness of the importance of school readiness, interest in its assessment has also increased (Lille et al., 2009).

Evaluations of students’ educational development at the start of kindergarten should include a rating or measure of the following constructs: expressive and receptive language,

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responses to stories, familiarity with books, familiarity with letters, emergent writing, counting, shapes and patterns, measurement, fine and gross motor skills, conflict resolution, social engagement, engagement with self-selected activities, and creative skills (Goldstein & McCoach, 2011). These types of evaluations would allow teachers to see a more detailed picture of individual students' development when entering kindergarten.

By assessing students before entering kindergarten, along with providing early intervention services for learners, we would be ahead of the curve. "The most effective way to prevent poor academic outcomes is to provide quality early intervention" (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007, p. 54). Therefore it should be our goal to increase the odds that each child will experience early and sustained school success. "As efforts to implement response-to-intervention strategies become more common in grades k-3, it is inevitable that efforts to build children's competencies will continue to be pushed into the preschool years (Bates et al., 2006, p. 53). It is contradictory with NCLB that there is increased accountability and assumed universal proficiency at a time when there is significant differences in children's abilities entering kindergarten (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007).

In order to prepare our students for a successful transition into kindergarten and equip them with the necessary readiness skills we need to strive to close the gap for all of our students. We need to focus on identifying and supporting children most at risk to encounter difficulties in kindergarten. We need to address special health care needs, the importance of preschool and early learning experiences, and focus on children from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. We also need to involve families as key partners. In all these ways, we will be ensuring that all children are ready for school and that schools are ready for them (Bates et al., 2006).

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In conclusion, kindergarten readiness is a multi-faceted, diverse, and ever-growing area of research. Students are faced with many issues that impact their learner and school readiness. However, there are many common threads that we can weave together to better prepare our children for success in school and help students and teachers meet their targets. Kindergarten readiness and early success dictates future academic success. I would like to focus more of our efforts on early prevention instead of later retention. I believe that by knowing the factors that influence kindergarten readiness, including age, high-quality early learning experiences, ethnic gaps, parents, communities, and school' roles, the need for early intervention and assessments, and bridging the transition into kindergarten with support and awareness; we can help more of our students enter kindergarten with the necessary skills and success needed throughout their academic careers. What children experience in their families, communities, and pre-kindergarten programs during the first five years of life matters.

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